

Among the first settlers

Black family settled in Washougal

The first American to settle north of the Columbia River, in defiance of the British Hudson's Bay Co., at Fort Vancouver, spent the winter of 1844-45 on the prairie that is now Washougal. He and his party were the first Americans to stay here for any length of time, although the Englishman Richard Ough was living here off and on with an Indian family.

It was this American emigrant's original intention to locate in the Willamette Valley where 211 other American pioneers had settled. However, when the wagon train reached the first civilization in Eastern Oregon, it was learned that blacks were not welcome south of the Columbia. The new Oregon provisional government that had been organized at Champeog, had decided that barring blacks was the simplest way of avoiding controversy over slavery, which was beginning to be a serious divisive force in the United States.

The leader of the wagon train was an Irish-American named Michael Troutman Simmons from Kentucky, who was, of course, white. But among the 80 wagons was a freeborn black named

George Washington Bush, whose wife was white. Bush was a native of Pennsylvania who moved to Missouri and made a small fortune farming. When the Simmons wagon train reached Missouri a group of Missourians, including the Bushes, joined them on the long trek across the Rockies to the "Promised Land."

What was so special about Bush was not his color but his bag of gold coins. He had loaned money to his fellow migrants and was considered an altogether good fellow. So when the wagons reached Oregon and learned about the black exclusion, several families were not about to

let their benefactors down. A group of them decided to head for the north bank of the Columbia where the new government of Oregon would not molest them.

Oddly enough, the area north of the Columbia all the way to Alaska was claimed by the new government as part of Oregon. But it was such a wild and uninhabited country that the Oregonians south of the river felt the Bushes would at least be out of sight.

So six or seven wagons, including the black family, headed for what was to become Clark County. There is no record that shows how they got here or why they selected Washougal for their first home in "Oregon" for the next year.

They had to float their wagons across the river and then find their way to Washougal. The Barlow trail through Government Camp and down to present-day Gresham had not yet been built, so whatever route they took to get here was indeed a tortuous one.

One clue to their selection of Washougal may have been a large stand of cedar, because the Americans spent the fall and

winter splitting shakes which they traded at Fort Vancouver for flour, salt, side pork and other necessities. This was the first "industry" in the Camas-Washougal area.

Simmons, a giant of a man about 30 years of age, inquired of Dr. McLoughlin at Fort Vancouver about the country to the north. He listened to the usual litany that the Hudson's Bay Co., did not consider the area suitable for Americans. McLoughlin knew of secret plans to move the Hudson's Bay headquarters from Vancouver to Fort Victoria, but he told Simmons the same story he had told

other Americans for the last 15 years.

The short-tempered young Kentuckian was adamant. He reasoned that if the British didn't want Americans up there, it must be a pretty good country. Simmons's Irish disdain for anything British was exceeded only by his love of personal freedom, so he told Dr. McLoughlin to go jump. Simmons organized a party of five men and explored the country as far north as Cowlitz Prairie near present-day Toledo.

The men returned to Washougal before winter set in and helped with the chores of survival. On April 14, 1845, Mrs. Simmons gave birth to Christopher Columbus Simmons. He has been called the first child born to American emigrants in what was to become Washington Territory. This has to be qualified by the fact that Narcissa Whitman had given birth to a child in Walla Walla somewhat earlier. Actually, Christopher was the first to be born on the west side of the Cascades.

In July, Simmons led another scouting party northward, this time to Puget Sound. He obtained a canoe and searched the shores of the Sound as far north as Whidby Island for a likely place to settle. He decided to locate at his starting place at the head of

Budd's Inlet. Here the falls of the Deschutes River would provide power for the flour and lumber mills he wanted to build.

Back in Washougal, Simmons reported his decision, gathered up his family and returned to Puget Sound with four other families, including the George Washington Bushes. By this time the Hudson's Bay Co., had resigned itself to the settlement of Americans north of the river, and gave the Simmons party a letter to the HBC trading posts at Cowlitz Prairie and Fort Nisqually to sell the Americans 200 bushels of wheat, 100 of peas, 300 of potatoes and a dozen head of cattle.

Mike Simmons named his new settlement New Market. Later settlers changed it to Tumwater. The "tum, tum" of the falls had inspired the Indians to give it this name long before the Americans arrived.

George Bush settled on what became Bush Prairie and took out a donation land claim. Many years later Congress affirmed his right to the land, even though he was black. Bush loaned provisions to the many American settlers who followed them to the Puget Sound country and continued his role of benefactor for many years. One of his sons continued

to farm the land after Bush's death, and won many awards for his agricultural products.

The black man went a step further in developing Tumwater. It was his bag of gold coins that made it possible for Mike Simmons to build the first lumber mill and first flour mill north of the Columbia River.

Simmons' decision to settle north of the Columbia was a good one. A year later the boundary treaty was signed awarding all the land south of the 49th parallel to the United States. Americans by the thousands began arriving in the area, and Simmons' mills did a good business.

In 1848, Congress gave Oregon territorial status. A couple of years later the new legislature decided to make a new county in the Puget Sound area. Local citizens wanted to call it Simmons County. Instead, the legislature opted for Thurston for the English-hating Samuel R. Thurston, the first territorial delegate to Congress.

So time and politics have all but obliterated the memory of the courageous and sometimes brash Irish-American who braved all kinds of hardships to keep himself and his family alive in Washougal during that miserable winter of 1844-45. —M.B.

Camas Post 1911

Rebekahs Install Officers

The installation of officers of the lodge of Rebekahs was held in the Odd Fellows hall Tuesday evening. The officers are as follows: Noble Grand, Mrs. C. E. Fernley, Vice Grand, Mrs. Maggie Province, Past Grand, Mrs. W. Swank, Recording Secretary, Mrs. S. G. Hadley, Financial Secretary, Mrs. Chas. McKeever, Chaplain, Mrs. H. S. Parker, Inside Guard, Mrs. Elizabeth McDonald, Outside Guard, Mrs. C. Oudekirk.

452 Couples Married.

There were 904 people married in Clark county in 1910 and only 80 divorces granted. There were 65 licenses issued in December, 18 of the contracting parties being widows.